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ABSTRACT

A national survey of daily newspaper editors was conducted in May 1986 for the purpose of determining editors' perceptions of religious broadcaster Pat Robertson. The study examined how well known Robertson is to editors, how they perceive him politically and personally, and why he is perceived by newspaper editors in the way that he is. A total of 798 survey forms were mailed out. Results, gleaned from 209 returned and useable questionnaires representing newspapers of varying circulation sizes, locations, and ideologies, revealed that editors' familiarity with Robertson varied widely; that editors generally had high regard for his personal character; and that editors strongly disagreed with Robertson's views on religion and politics. (Three tables of data are included and 14 references are attached.) (SR)

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A NATION-WIDE SURVEY OF DAILY NEWSPAPER EDITORS ON THEIR PERCEPTIONS OF PAT ROBERTSON

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ABSTRACT

A national survey of approximately one-half of the nation's daily newspaper editors was conducted in May of 1986 for the purpose of determining their perceptions of religious broadcaster Pat Robertson. The study examined how well known Robertson is to editors, how they perceive him politically and personally, and why he is perceived by newspaper editors in the way that he is. Results showed that while editors generally have high regard for Robertson's personal character, they strongly disagree with his views on matters of religion and politics.

When John F. Kennedy ran for president in 1960, he had to convince the American people that his Catholicism would not interfere with his duties in the White House. Sixteen years later, a "born again" former governor from Georgia faced similar scrutiny when he ran for the presidency. Both men were successful in their bid for the Oval Office, despite questions regarding their religious beliefs.

In Kennedy's case, concerns regarding his Catholicism were laid to rest in the West Virginia primary. His overwhelming victory there prompted Time magazine to report that Kennedy had swept aside the religious issue and proved that "a Catholic could win handily in a heavily Protestant state" (3).

With James Earl "Jimmy" Carter, the religious question centered on his being a born-again Christian who claimed to have a personal relationship with God. In a 1976 speech addressing the African Methodist Episcopal Church in Buffalo, New York, Carter said, "I have never seen any conflict between being a deeply committed Christian on the one hand and holding public office on the other" (8). Acceptance or rejection of Carter's blend of religion and politics was ultimately decided by the American voter. Whether it was indifference or acceptance, Carter did become president and the religious questions subsided.

Following Carter's term of office, Ronald Reagan began his occupancy of the White House. As a leader he has been outspoken on a number of moral and religious issues. From his stand on prayer in public schools to his strong position against abortion, Reagan has incorporated his personal beliefs into his decisions on many moral, religious and political issues.

With Reagan's imminent departure in 1988, a number of new faces are beginning to appear on the political horizon. At least one political newcomer will face many of the same questions regarding religion and politics which faced Kennedy, Carter and Reagan.

Marion Gordon "Pat" Robertson, a businessman and Christian broadcaster, is seriously considering a run for the Oval office on the Republican ticket in 1988.

Beginning in March of 1985, a number of journalists and political analysts began to speculate that a Robertson bid was more than just rumor. Time magazine said, "political pros are uncertain how big a factor he (Robertson) could be in the primaries, let alone the convention, but they are convinced he could energize the Christian right and siphon votes from other candidates" (7). Paul G. Kirk, Jr. , chairman of the Democratic National Committee, said in a fund-raising letter to 50,000 fellow Democrats that he believed Robertson "could well take the Republican nomination and be the candidate to be reckoned with in the general election" (4).

Opinions regarding the viability of a Robertson bid have not been confined to the secular press. In an editorial that appeared in The Christian Century, James M. Wall commented that if Robertson chose his primaries carefully and targeted right-wing districts with strong fundamental leanings, he could control enough delegates in the 1988 election to assure him of a major role in the next election as well as the next administration (13).

If Robertson should decide to run, as many now believe he will, then

it is important to understand how he will be perceived by those who would cover him during the next presidential campaign. Because much of the in-depth election coverage during the 1988 elections will take place in daily newspapers, it is important to understand how editors who help decide what to print in their paper perceive Robertson.

Research done by Rothman and Lichter (11), has shown that journalists basically share a liberal and cosmopolitan view of life when compared with other American leadership groups. Findings of the study also indicated that the ideology and personality of the reporter did affect the manner in which they reported and perceived events in the real world and tended to be somewhat critical of traditional institutions and conservative social and political leaders and policies.

Rothman and Lichter are supported by the research of the Connecticut Mutual Life Insurance Company (9), which found that most leadership groups, including journalists, tend to be out of touch with the pulse of the American public.

Concerning the public's opinion of the press, both the American Society of Newspaper Editors' Study (10) and the Times Mirror Study (2) report that a large percentage of the public view the press as liberally biased and easily influenced .

In light of these findings, a nationwide survey of daily newspaper editors was conducted to determine their attitudes and perceptions of Pat Robertson. Specifically, the purpose of the survey was to find out how well Robertson was known to editors being surveyed, how he was perceived both personally and politically, and why he was perceived in

such a manner.

The participants of the survey were managing editors of daily newspapers from across the United States. Nearly one-half of the nation's daily newspapers, or 798 editors, were contacted by mail. Using the same method as Luttberg (5), the editors were selected at random from a listing of daily newspapers in the The 1985 Editor & Publisher International Yearbook (14). Selected editors represented both sexes and all ages. They also included newspapers of all circulation sizes, varied locations and a wide scope of ideologies.

The instrument that was administered was a one-page questionnaire containing ten questions. Along with each survey a cover letter and a self-addressed stamped envelope were enclosed.

Of the 798 surveys that were sent out, a total of 271 were returned, giving the survey a response rate 33 percent. Almost half of the surveys were returned within a week's time, possibly indicating a high interest level on the part of the editors. Sixty-two questionnaires were eliminated from consideration because they were not filled out according to the instructions, leaving 209 responses.

The first two items on the survey involved the region where the paper was published and the circulation size of the paper. Region was operationalized by dividing the United States into four geographic areas (West, North-Central, Northeast and South), according to the guidelines used by the U.S. Bureau of Census. Editors were asked to list the state in which their paper was located, and then were placed into one of the four regions according to their response. [1]

Close to 40 percent of the respondents were from Southern states, followed by 30 percent from the North Central region, 15 percent from the West and just under 15 percent from the Northeast region .

The circulation size of each paper was also requested on the survey. Circulation was divided into four categories. The first included papers with a daily circulation size of less than 10,000. The second contained papers with a circulation size of 10,000 to 24,999. The third included papers with a circulation size of 25,000 to 49,999. The fourth was for newspapers with a circulation of 50,000 and above. The largest percentage of survey responses came from category one papers (35 percent), followed by catagory two papers (31 percent), catagory three papers (19 percent), and newspapers with a circulation of 50,000 and up (14 percent).

The third item appearing on the survey asked editors, "From what source did you first become familiar with Pat Robertson?" Fifty-eight percent said that they first became familiar with Robertson from television. Twenty-one percent said newspapers, followed by 11 percent who reported multiple sources, 4 percent who said magazines and 2 percent who first heard of Robertson from another person.

The fourth question that appeared on the survey asked editors how much they thought they knew about Pat Robertson. Twenty-eight percent said they felt they knew "quite a bit" about Robertson, while 59 percent responded that they knew "just a little" about him, 11 percent replied that they had "hardly any" knowledge of Robertson and 1 percent said they knew nothing at all. The percentage of those who reported knowing nothing at all about Robertson may well be higher than 1 percent. This is due to the fact

that a number of surveys were returned blank except for a comment to the effect that the respondent had never heard of Pat Robertson so they could not fill out the survey. It should be pointed out that the questionnaire was sent to editors during the first week of May, 1986. Since that time Robertson has received major media attention due in part to his strong showing in the pre-selection process of delegates in the state of Michigan and has appeared on all three major television networks and the covers of numerous news magazines. If the survey were sent out today, there is a much better chance that a higher percentage of editors would be familiar with Robertson.

Results also show that the South and the Midwest are more familiar with Robertson than the West and the Northeast. Only 10 percent of the respondents from the West knew "quite a bit" or "a great deal" about Robertson (see Table 1). This compares with 34 percent in the North-central region, 31 percent in the South, and 28 percent in the Northeast. To test the hypothesis that Robertson is better known in the South and Midwest than he is in the West and Northeast, a corrected chi-square was run.

INSERT TABLE 1 HERE

As there were too many expected cell frequencies below 5, it was impossible to test the independence of rows and columns in Table 1. Consequently, region was collapsed into two categories (North-central and South, West and Northeast) as was Robertson's notoriety (Catagories 1,2, and 3 for those who knew very little about him, categories 4 and 5 for those who knew quite a bit). Table 2 shows the frequencies after collapsing the categories.

INSERT TABLE 2 HERE

The results of the corrected chi-square showed that x^2 (1, N= 204) = 3.94, $p < .08$, which, according to Mantel (6) is equivalent to a significance level of .04 for Fisher's exact test. Thus it seems that Robertson is better known in the South and North-central United States than he is in the Northeast and Western region.

One can only speculate that this phenomenon may be due in part to the South being the "Bible belt," or perhaps the difference in regional exposure Robertson was receiving from his work as a co-host of the "700 Club" on the Christian Broadcasting Network (CBN). Regardless of the reason, the fact still remains that his notoriety shows regional variance.

When editors were asked to rate the media coverage concerning Pat Robertson, 10 percent reported that the coverage had been unfavorable, 75 percent said it had been neutral and 15 percent felt coverage of Robertson had been favorable. It is interesting to note that not one of the 204 editors who responded to this question felt that coverage of Robertson had been "very unfavorable," but more than one editor did say that Robertson suffered from being associated with other television evangelists. One editor from Missouri commented that the issue wasn't whether the media coverage of Robertson had been favorable or not, but rather that most of the coverage "has simply been shallow, as has been the case with most television evangelists."

The sixth question on the survey contained a list of 18 words relating to political views, occupational titles, and personal character qualities. Editors were asked to assess Pat Robertson according to the terms listed on the survey. Editors were asked to read each term and rate, using a five point scale, how well a particular term decribed Pat Robertson. Consult Table 3 for the results of question six.[2]

INSERT TABLE 3 HERE

Feelings regarding Robertson ran strong on both sides. On the negative side editors labeled him "smug" and "arrogant." Others called him "a ripoff and a phony." Still others expressed concern over mixing religion and politics. While these types of responses were in the minority, it is clear that those who disagree with Robertson do so with great intensity.

On the positive side of the scale, many editors expressed respect for Robertson. One editor from Texas wrote, "He is a highly educated individual whose qualifications are better than most people think. " Another comment stated, "Robertson has the qualifications to be president in terms of his education and intellect, which leaves his view on the issues as the remaining issue in his candidacy."

Question seven asked editors to express their approval or disapproval of the following statement. "Fundamental religious groups in politics and government have too much influence in the political process." At a ratio of over two-to-one (45 percent to 20 percent), editors said that they agreed with the statement. The remaining editors were either neutral or undecided on the issue.

Question eight asked editors to agree or disagree with the following statement: "Pat Robertson would be a viable candidate for president." Of the editors that responded, an overwhelming 83 percent said they did not think Robertson was a viable candidate for president. Six percent said they would consider him a viable contender for the presidency.

Eleven percent were undecided or neutral. One question that might be raised concerns the relationship between viability and lack of knowledge concerning Robertson. The possibility does exist that Robertson's lack of

viability on question eight may be related to the fact that he was not very well known at the time the survey was conducted.

Comments concerning Robertson's viability represented a wide range of opinion. One editor wrote, "I have observed him many times on television and read quite a few news articles. I believe he is worried about the future of America and its liberal laws governing our people. We will be watching with great interest his future in politics although I can not say now how I would vote." Another editor responded, "I don't believe the U.S. electorate is ready to accept a fundamentalist preacher for president. But I didn't think it was ready for an actor either."

The first goal of this study concerned a desire to determine how well known Pat Robertson was to daily newspaper editors. Results of the survey indicate that a large number of editors know very little about Robertson and a smaller but equally significant number know nothing at all. This lack of knowledge concerning Robertson was a source of frustration for a number of editors. A few demanded to know who he was, while some thought the whole survey was an attempt to promote an obscure person for the presidency. At least four newspapers with a circulation of over 50,000 said they had never heard of Robertson, and a number of other smaller papers made similar remarks.

Although a majority of editors know very little about Robertson, 28 percent did indicate that they felt they knew "quite a bit" to "a great deal" about him. As previously discussed, many of these responses generated from the South and Midwest.

One possible reason for Robertson's lack of noteriety might stem from the fact that he has not officially declared himself as a candidate for the presidency. It quite likely that his public exposure would increase once that announcement was made.

The second goal, with regard to this study, was to determine how Robertson would be perceived personally and politically by the editors. Editors, on the whole, rated him fairly high in terms of personal character while tending to rate his political and religious views as extreme. Editors said that Robertson was honest (40 percent), sincere (44 percent), intelligent (56 percent), compassionate (29 percent), patriotic (61 percent), and that he had a charismatic personality (48 percent).

However, in the areas of politics and religion, editors were quite negative in their rating of Robertson. Almost half (49 percent), said he was a religious extremist and 44 percent said that his political views were extreme as well. Only 9 percent said that Robertson represented mainstream America and 74 percent considered him "right wing." It would appear that although Robertson is respected personally by many editors, he is considered somewhat extreme in matters of politics and religion.

One topic for future research would involve whether or not the views held by managing editors are representative of the American public. The research done by Rothman and Lichter (11), the Connecticut Mutual Life Insurance Company (9), and the Los Angeles Times (12), do not support the idea that the opinions of the media express those of the American public.

The instrument that was sent to daily newspaper editors was designed to give them an opportunity to make individual remarks

concerning Robertson. One out of every four questionnaires that were returned, contained some type of written comment. After categorizing these comments, two reasons emerge as to why editors feel the way the do about Pat Robertson.

The first is that editors appear to be very suspicious of anybody that does not align with their own world view. An editor from Michigan put it this way: "I will be amazed if this survey is not used by Robertson to slam the media -- particularly if it turns out to have unfavorable perceptions of him. (The) thing is though, newspaper people are suspicious of all politicians -- secular or religious or whatever."

Part of the hostility of the press seems to be aimed at the fact that Robertson is a conservative and a religious broadcaster. Research shows that journalists hold views far to the left of the general public, and it is quite possible that editors feel threatened by someone who represents a far more conservative view of the world which includes strong religious and moral convictions on most issues.

The second reason why editors might hold a negative view of Robertson as a political candidate stems from the whole concept of mixing religion and politics. In examining dozens of newspaper articles and editorials at the outset of this project, one of the most common concerns expressed by the press was the fear that Robertson would impose his own moral and political views on the rest of the country. See, for example, Sara Diamond's editorial in the Oakland Tribune (1). This fear, coupled with the ideological differences between the conservative Robertson, and the more liberal press, would seem to provide a strong incentive for the

press to be critical of a political venture on Robertson's part.

Much remains to be learned concerning the role of the press in reporting the news. The results of this survey not only provide valuable information concerning Pat Robertson, but raise many serious questions regarding bias in the media. Further study into the perceptions made of and by the media are necessary to determine to what degree journalists "color" the news they report and what effect their interpretations of the news have on the public's perception of events and individuals.

TABLE 1

	Nothing At All	Hardly Any	A Little	Quite A Bit	A Great Deal
West	0	3	25	3	0
North-central	0	10	30	20	1
South	2	5	48	24	1
Northeast	0	5	18	8	1

TABLE 2

	Did not know him very well	Knew him very well
South & North-Central	**95**	**46**
Northeast & West	**51**	**12**

TABLE 3

Responses to question six

	Column A Describes him well	Column B Doesn't describe well	Column C Not sure
Honest	40%	18%	41%
Sincere	44%	23%	33%
Intelligent	56%	6%	37%
Deluded	17%	48%	34%
Uninformed	13%	48%	39%
Conservative	88%	2%	10%
Political Extremist	44%	24%	32%
Dangerous	17%	53%	29%
Patriotic	61%	8%	30%
Mainstream America	9%	58%	33%
Religious Extremist	49%	18%	33%
Charismatic Person	48%	16%	36%
Right Wing	74%	7%	18%
Compassionate	29%	20%	51%
Liberal	2%	91%	7%
Businessman	55%	16%	28%
Politician	48%	24%	29=
TV Evangelist	90%	3%	7%

1

The four geographic regions are:

The West -- California, Arizona, New Mexico, Idaho, Colorado, Utah, Oregon, Washington, Montana, Wyoming, Nevada, Alaska, and Hawaii.

North Central -- North Dakota, South Dakota, Minnesota, Iowa, Missouri, Kansas, Illinois, Indiana, Ohio, Michigan, Wisconsin and Nebraska.

The South -- Texas, Oklahoma, Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Tennessee, Alabama, Florida, Georgia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Kentucky, Virginia, West Virginia, Maryland, and Delaware.

The Northeast -- Pennsylvania, Connecticut, New York, Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and New Jersey

2

Table 3 results are based on a five point scale which was collapsed to show four and five as positive responses (they did describe him well) and one and two as negative responses (they did not describe him well). Those who were unsure responded with a three.

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